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PRESENCE—

Do We Stay or Do We Go?

By JAMES A. LASSWELL

America maintained an unprecedented level of its military strength overseas for over forty years—from a quarter to a third of the Armed Forces. The primary purpose was to contain the Soviet Union. This rationale is now gone leaving defense intellectuals to debate how to protect our interests in a new era. The naval camp contends it can be achieved by *forward presence*—keeping some combat forces abroad. The continental camp argues that it can be accomplished with *virtual presence*—forces based in the United States but capable of rapidly responding to overseas crises. This is the difference between being engaged on the world scene and a return to Fortress America.

What Now?

Form follows function in overseas presence as elsewhere. That presence was structured to oppose a specific land power in the Cold War, the Soviet Bloc. U.S. presence abroad during that period—excluding the Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars—averaged about half a million. Of those, almost 400,000 were Army and Air Force personnel who directly countered threats in Europe and Korea. Naval forces made up the balance, supporting Europe and Korea on the maritime flanks. And they handled uncertain threats—some 80 percent of the crises to which the Nation responded from 1945 to the end of the Cold War. As the Soviet threat receded, so did land-based presence in Europe. Force levels there dropped from

340,000 in 1989 to under 100,000 today. On the other hand, naval presence remains about the same as it was during the Cold War, just under 100,000. Why? While the certain threat went away, the uncertain ones did not.

Now an intense competition for resources among the services prompts the question: does the systematic naval presence stay or does it go? The new Air Force white paper *Global Presence* (published in the last issue of *JFQ*) proposes replacing “the cop on the beat” with virtual presence, satellite coverage of key areas backed by CONUS-based bombers and troop transports responding on warning. Still others maintain that defense attachés, mobile training teams, and ground units deployed for allied exercises are an effective overseas presence. In essence, these alternatives are all CONUS-based strategies indicative of isolationism.

The more important question is what does the Nation seek to achieve on the world scene? If we choose a strategy that is not supportive of that, the costs could be higher than realized.

What was a by-product of the Cold War now becomes the primary reason for maintaining forces overseas—a liberal world economy. It developed behind the walls of containment, with the oceans—under the aegis of a forward Navy—as the unifying medium. North America, Western Europe, and East Asia account for three-quarters of the gross world product. Accordingly, the National Security Strategy seeks enlargement, incorporating Cold War outsiders in this economy, on the premise that prosperity will bring regional stability.

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The world economy that came out of the Cold War is vulnerable to post-Cold War disorder. Absent a threat, the international community is becoming increasingly susceptible to fragmentation. The symptoms are all too apparent: the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, rogue states, the rise of national rivalries, deteriorating states, ethnic unrest, and mass refugee migrations. The world economic system is susceptible to disorder as demonstrated by the 1987 Gulf Tanker War, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the recent collapse of the Mexican peso.

Why Forward?

U.S. military presence remains central to the regional stability on which the expansion and enlargement of the world economy depends. A 1992 survey of American embassies around the Mediterranean indicated unanimous agreement on the deterrent value of our presence. East Asian nations want our presence for the same reason. American presence deters since it represents the might of the only superpower. As Admiral William A. Owens, USN—the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—recently wrote, “Any potential opponent must assume that it cannot win a military confrontation with the United States.”¹

American presence is a critical thread holding together an otherwise fragmenting world

Overseas presence is real, as opposed to hypothetical, use of CONUS-based forces. “Any potential opponent of the United States contemplating a *fait accompli* strategy,” Owens continues, “is likely to see greater risk if U.S. forces are visibly present than if they are not.” The initiative rests more with on-the-scene forces. They can readily influence events in contrast to the reactive nature of CONUS-based forces. And if this forward presence fails to deter, it becomes the “tip of the spear,” the enabler for follow-on forces.

The efficacy of presence is readily apparent. Many nations in Asia want America to remain the countervailing power in the face of an ascendant China. In the Mediterranean, U.S. presence keeps rogue states such as Libya in check. In addition, the rescue of noncombatants from Liberia in 1990 and, in particular, from Somalia in 1991 largely relied on the proximity of naval forces. And

when presence failed to deter Iraq, U.S. carriers covered the initial airlift to Saudi Arabia.

American presence is a critical thread holding together an otherwise fragmenting world. Its interactions engage allies and friends in cooperative security efforts. When sustained over time, it builds interoperability among forces. It sets the stage in crises for successful coalitions which are ad hoc in nature. Operation Desert Storm succeeded largely because of four decades of allied work in NATO. Moreover, a credible American combat presence provides a nucleus around which the forces from other nations can coalesce.

Why Naval?

Clearly, presence is critical to the security environment. But while many nations want the United States to remain in their region, most do not want foreign troops on their soil even in times of crisis, as has been often seen. American presence will withdraw increasingly from Eurasian shores to the decks of vessels operating in the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and western Pacific. Naval forces, which accounted for a fifth of our overseas presence in the Cold War, are expected to reach half after 2000. Future naval presence will involve more than just crisis response, which is how most people view it today. As Owens notes, “Naval forces will increasingly be seen as representative of the entire range of U.S. military power.”²

While naval presence may be out of sight and mind for most Americans, its visibility to others means it plays a greater role in deterrence. As always, deterrence depends on an opponent receiving, understanding, and heeding an intended signal. “We perceived the U.S. Navy as more psychologically impressive,” a former Soviet admiral stated, “since the U.S. Air Force maneuvers were not so obvious.”³ Conversely, the British relied on overflights to demonstrate their interest in the Falklands prior to the 1982 Argentine invasion.

With the diffusion of nuclear power, forward-deployed naval forces will be a more credible deterrent. The threat posed by U.S. strategic weapons may be seen by lesser nuclear states as too disproportionate to be credible. Accordingly, deterrence will shift

toward conventional weapons with greater accuracy and lethality, launched by forward-postured carrier air and Tomahawk land-attack missiles.⁴ Deterrence may also depend on ship-based theater missile defenses.

Engaging and enlarging cooperative security efforts will be done increasingly through naval presence. Their success in crisis depends on building confidence in military capabilities, as well as interoperability, beforehand. But many nations do not have the domestic political capital to allow U.S. forces on their turf for exercises, not to mention for operations. In the words of the Chief of Naval Operations, "Naval overseas presence may be the best way to establish military-to-military relationships with many of these new nations . . . they welcome the contact with the United States but do not want to be smothered by it."⁵ Largely because of this, the Navy participated in 163 combined exercises involving 58 nations in 1994.

The most unappreciated reason for naval presence is freedom of the seas. The seas remain unrestricted to global trade and strategic mobility largely because of the Navy. This is more than a nod to Mahan. Under the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (LOS) regional waters are more militarized and some 82 countries have claimed excessive territorial seas. Unless contested, these claims might be regarded as valid through acquiescence. Since the advent of LOS in 1982, such claims have been operationally challenged more than 200 times, primarily by the Navy, and as a result 12 nations have formally rolled back their claims.⁶

What If We Don't?

Those who advocate CONUS-based strategies may not be considering the consequences of an increasingly fragmented world. After the continuous presence of American forces in a region, many nations would likely regard reduction or withdrawal as a diminishing of U.S. interest. Their anxieties are likely to be manifested in forms of protectionism not realized before.

The link between a reassuring presence and liberal trade must not be ignored. It is unlikely that a nation would raise trade barriers without concern over the withdrawal of U.S. forces by an angry American public.

This appears to have influenced Japan's rejection of the Malaysian proposal for a strictly Asian political-economic forum that excluded the United States. But American military withdrawal means removing a key incentive to discouraging the formation of trading barriers and blocs. Consider the disintegration of the world economy into trading blocs where competition might turn adversarial.

Also consider a world without U.S. presence, one in which security concerns drive nations to acquire nuclear weapons. Asia is a prime example. Faced with a nuclear-armed China, Japan would likely seek a nuclear arsenal if our presence was retracted. If Japan went nuclear, so could most of East Asia. Maintaining or abandoning overseas presence may mean the difference between nuclear proliferation being constrained or unconstrained. Those who believe presence can be provided with less than credible combat power—such as mobile training teams or defense attachés—may find that they have offered up hostages to hostile nations and groups.

Overseas presence is the price a super-power pays for doing business in a relatively safe and secure world. There is no short-cut. Presence means either being there or not. It is the difference between engagement and isolation. If we choose the latter option, it is likely to lead to a more dangerous world that is far more costly than maintaining overseas presence today. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ William A. Owens, *High Seas: The Naval Passage to an Uncharted World* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1995), p. 12.

² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³ Stanley B. Weeks, "U.S. Naval Forward Presence in the Cold War: Perceptions of Former Soviet Elites" (Science Applications International Corporation, November 1994).

⁴ Joint Strategic Planning Staff, "The Role of Nuclear Weapons in the New World Order," Report of the Science Advisory Group, October 1991, p. 26.

⁵ Presentation by the Chief of Naval Operations to the Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces, September 20, 1994.

⁶ CJCS Instruction 2420.01, August 16, 1993, enclosure B, "Illegal Maritime Claims"; DOD Representative for Ocean Policy Affairs memorandum, subject: "Excessive Maritime Claims," March 23, 1995.